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Processing and Maintaining Congressional Collections: The Congressional Papers Roundtable Survey

Mary Boccaccio

The Congressional Papers Roundtable of the Society of American Archivists was organized in 1984 and in recent years has maintained a membership of approximately one hundred individual members representing sixty-five federal and government repositories and private institutions, large, medium, and small in size. In 1990/91, the roundtable conducted a survey of its non-federal government members in order to determine the kinds of institutions that actively were collecting congressional papers and the levels of processing that were currently being conducted. Thirty-nine percent of the roundtable members responded. The survey dealt specifically with post-World War II congressional papers. This cut-off period was chosen in an effort to gauge the impact of copying and computer technology,

which is represented in geometrically increasing bulk and impact on acquisition and processing. Rather the results, particularly in the area of description, illustrated a period of stagnation before the explosion of electronic means of description and access in the early 1990s.

THE SURVEY

Questions included information about the repository, such as the total number of collections and the number of congressional collections held and staff size. Acquisition information concerned the means of original contact, relationship to the institution, and time in the member's career at which contact with a repository was made. Questions relating to processing addressed the levels to which the collections were being processed, disposition of series, collection description and the impact of computer technology, and preservation.

THE REPOSITORIES

The reporting repositories held a total of 2418 collections. Of these, 117 were post-World War II congressional papers. The total cubic footage for all collections was 50,581, with the cubic feet of congressional collections representing over half that total at 28,256. The number per institution varied, in part because of institution size, staff, and budget, but it appears that not just large institutions are interested and committed to preserving these collections. Average staffing was just over two per

institution reporting. The use of interns and students assistants was frequently noted in conjunction with some phase of processing these papers.

ACQUISITION

Half of the respondents had an institutional collecting policy. A state-wide collecting program was in place in four states. Collections held included one hundred and twenty from the U. S. House of Representatives, fifty-four from the U. S. Senate, and ten from the state general assembly. These numbers overlapped because individuals often progress from one office to another. Fifty-four percent of the institutions accepted congressional papers, while thirty-eight percent actively solicited them. The caveat here is that solicitation was selective. Of the one hundred and seventeen collections held, ninety were offered to the institution. Repositories reported turning down two collections, referring one, and losing eight.

Acquisition was reported equally during the member's active career and after his or her retirement, which also included death or losing a reelection bid. In over seventy-five percent of the cases noted, initial contact was made by the repository, while in sixteen instances (fourteen percent), the member made the initial contact. University officials and the member's family made the rest of the initial contacts. In two cases, repository staff members did not have a record of how their institution had acquired a collection.

Fifty-one percent of the congressional collections reported went to the member's undergraduate institution. Forty-two collections were reported as having other types of connections to their repositories including being an in-state institution or having the member on the board of regents or the faculty. Deeds of gift were reported for seventy-three or fifty-one percent of the collections.

PROCESSING

In recent years, both the House and the Senate historical offices encouraged members to make arrangements with a repository early and start transferring records as they become inactive. It became possible as well to begin the arrangement of a collection in a member's office. An archivist from the repository accepting the collection could spend time as part of the member's staff, learning systems, planning series, arranging transfer, and negotiating discard.

In other cases, archivists without institutional affiliation and specializing in congressional collections were hired by the member's office in a consulting capacity and actually prepared the papers for a repository. Series were fine tuned and in-house computer systems documented, duplicated, and contents printed out as necessary. It is possible to have systematic preparation for transfer to the receiving institution. Any documentation required can be prepared. In nine cases or twenty-five percent of the instances reported, processing began in the member's office. In four cases (eleven percent), it was reported

simultaneously in dual locations, while in the remainder, it began more traditionally at the receiving institution alone. These two latter trends—processing in the member's office and processing in two locations—seem likely to continue.

Of the 117 collections reported, 104 (eighty-eight percent) were considered to be completely processed by the holding institution. However, the definition of final processing often depended on the collection in question. For example, different series were processed and described to different levels. For these large collections, archivists reported that sixty-five (sixty-two percent) were processed at the series level; ninety-one (eighty-seven percent) at the folder level; and seven (six percent) at the item level. Hand lists, frequently used as quick and dirty finding aids, existed for twenty-one collections (twenty percent), while special indexing was done for twenty (nineteen percent). Computer access was available for only two collections—a figure that should have increased exponentially since the survey was conducted. Still, some of the responding archivists consider thirty-six of these collections not completely processed.

Because these modern-day collections are so voluminous, it is necessary to weed them down in order that institutions will be able to preserve them and scholars will be able to use them effectively. There are three prime areas for discard other than constituent correspondence. These include case work files or correspondence with constituents who have an official problem with a governmental agency or department and ask for a member's help to reach a solution; bucked files—those problems that are forwarded directly to the department or agency for response; and

routine discards such as duplicates and requests for government publications, photographs, flags, and similar items.

While some members place more emphasis on case work than others, in almost all congressional collections, case work and bucked files generally comprise a very large percentage of total collection volume. Privacy is an additional concern and, when accepted, these files are generally closed for a set period of time. There has been a more recent trend for members' offices to discard case files regularly. Archives have either opted to discard, sample, or simply not accept these files. In the survey, thirty percent reported discarding some, twenty-five percent discarded all, five percent no longer accepted them, and five percent sampled. Twenty-five percent kept all case files and five percent did not accession them. Specific sampling methods were not reported, although one respondent noted saving ten percent and another twenty percent. Comments included particular note that different methods of discard were used at different times.

Duplicates were a routine discard in only fifty-two percent of the collections. Perhaps this is true because of the time and effort required to find and remove duplicate material. Also, in some offices, administrative assistants (AA) kept their own files in a system separate from the main office files. While much of this material is duplicate, it would take much time and effort to weed and would destroy any understanding of how the office and staff functioned. Government publications were kept in ten percent of the cases reported, transferred to the documents section of the

institution's library fifteen percent of the time, and discarded in the remainder of instances.

DESCRIPTION

Not surprisingly, finding aids varied in kind and format from institution to institution, and use of more than one kind of description was not unusual. The formal description with typed hard copy was not necessarily the final or only description of the collection. Thirty-one percent of the 117 collections had a formal description, while thirty-eight percent had typed copies. Eleven percent had hand lists and seven percent had the description on microfilm. Interestingly, even though only two collections kept and converted the computer data, twenty percent or fifty-four collections were reported as being on a database in the repository—a figure that has undoubtedly increased.

The main form of collection announcement reported varied. On-line cataloging included seven in OCLC, six in RLIN, and three in WLN. Apparently little effort was made to announce the collections in other ways, beyond the repositories' newsletters and in-house databases. Generally, congressional collections were not being announced as ready for research.

PRESERVATION

Most of the collections arrived in the repository in fairly good physical condition. The main problem reported was brittleness (ten collections). Problems such as mold,

mildew, and insect damage were reported but in very small percentages. One repository noted making copies of video and audio tapes.

In processing, nineteen of the twenty-six institutions refolder while twenty-two rebox. Only four had microfilmed all or part of a collection and fourteen photocopied occasionally when the condition of the original necessitated it. While Senate computer tapes had been available to repositories since 1975, and the various House systems since 1977, only two institutions reported conversion of tapes to another system.

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